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When vigilantes turn bad: Gangs, violence, and social change in urban Nicaragua

Dennis Rodgers

Introduction

On 12 February 2002, I returned for the first time in almost five years to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández,¹ a poor neighbourhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua, where I had previously carried out research on youth gang violence.² I was revisiting in order to “update” my original study, a process that I have to admit I conceived less as a “realist” cataloguing of social change than as a “constructivist reconstruction” of my initial interpretations, to use the terminology of Burawoy’s theory of “reflexive ethnography”.³ Following Nicaragua from afar, little seemed to have changed since my initial study, and I thought that my revisit would therefore mainly involve rethinking the processes I had uncovered previously from new theoretical viewpoints. This rather naïve notion was completely shattered on my first day back in the *barrio* when I met Ronnie, who as a nine year old member of the local gang had been an important informant in 1996-97. He greeted me with an enthusiastic “Oye, Dennis, what’s up?”, and followed this up with a rapid-fire patter of questions:

“How are you, *hombre*, where have you been, it’s been a while since we’ve seen you around here. What’s new, you look like you’ve really changed... *¡Te pusiste gordo, maje!* (You’ve become fat, mate!).”

“Hi Ronnie, nice to see you too!”, I answered. “I’m doing OK, sorry it took me so long to come back, all sorts of things have happened, my life’s completely different now. But hey, you’ve changed as well, man! You were just a kid last time I was here and look at you now – you’re so big! What are you now, 14, 15, no? How are you doing? What are you up to? Are you still a *pandillero* (gang member)?”

“Nah, I’m no longer with the *pandilla* (gang), all that’s changed, *maje*. So much has changed here – you won’t recognise the *barrio* (neighbourhood), I tell you. The gang’s not the same as when you were here, it’s got a different *onda* (ethos) now and no longer looks after the neighbourhood any more but does its own thing instead. ...The whole *barrio* is

¹ This name is a pseudonym, as are all the names mentioned in this chapter.

² See Rodgers (2000). This first period of fieldwork was carried out between July 1996 and July 1997. The second period described in this chapter was conducted between February and March 2002 as part of the London School of Economics Crisis States Programme (see <http://www.crisisstates.com>).

³ See Burawoy (2003).

completely different to when you were here before, Dennis. Everything's fucked up now, especially the gang, which has turned bad..."

It came as a surprise to hear that Ronnie was no longer a gang member, as he was not yet of an age to have "matured out" of the youth gang, as inevitably happened to all members at some point between the ages of 18 and 23 years old (youth not being an eternal condition). At the same time, my prior research had shown that *pandillero* trajectories are difficult to predict, and several 14-15 year olds had left the gang during my fieldwork in 1996-97. It was, however, a complete shock to hear that the gang had "turned bad", as Ronnie put it. The main finding of my previous research had been that contrary to received wisdom, the *pandilla* had provided a significant measure of stability and order to the local neighbourhood in a wider Nicaraguan context of crisis, insecurity, and state and social breakdown. I could see no reason why the gang might have "turned bad" considering the country's continuing dismal predicament, but it rapidly became clear that Ronnie was not wrong in his assessment of the *pandilla's* changed dynamics, to the extent that during the course of my revisit I sometimes felt as if I was re-investigating a completely different phenomenon.

This chapter explores how and why Nicaraguan *pandillerismo* (youth gangsterism) changed so radically between 1997 and 2002. It begins by tracing the major differences between the 1996-97 manifestation of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang that I initially studied on the one hand, and its 2002 avatar on the other, highlighting in particular the divergences relating to the gang's violent social practices and attitudes towards the local neighbourhood community. Drawing on the theoretical lens of vigilantism, it characterises the variation between the two manifestations of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang as resulting from the inherent "lability" of vigilante practices, and considers what this tells us about the nature of the gang's evolution, but also what it does not tell us. It then explores the actual details of the process of the gang's transformation between 1997 and 2002 in order to properly understand this "lability", before concluding with certain general considerations about processes of institutional change.

Pandillerismo in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, 1997-2002

In 1996-97, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* was made up of about 100 male youths aged between 7 and 22 years old, who engaged in a variety of violent activities ranging from petty delinquency to gang warfare. These all complied with a

cardinal “golden rule”, however, which was not to prey on local neighbourhood inhabitants. The victims of the local gang were always outsiders, and gang members in fact went out of their way to protect local neighbourhood inhabitants from outside criminals and *pandilleros*. Even what at first glance seemed to be an unmitigatedly destructive form of *pandilla* violence, gang warfare, was arguably fundamentally socially constitutive. Conflicts followed set behavioural rules – attacking certain opposing gang members rather than others, defending local neighbourhood inhabitants, fighting in particular ways – that played important roles in the construction of the individual gang member self, for example. Gang wars also contributed to the constitution of the gang as a group, reaffirming the collective unit by emphasizing the primordial distinction between “us” and “them”. But gang warfare was arguably also about a broader form of social construction that related to the local community. Indeed, the *pandilleros* qualified their wars as being motivated by their “love” for the neighbourhood, portraying their fighting of other gangs as “acts of love”.⁴ As a gang member called Julio put it:

“You show the neighbourhood that you love it by putting yourself in danger for people, by protecting them from other *pandillas*... You look after the neighbourhood; you help them, keep them safe...”

This is by no means implausible. Gang warfare was semi-ritualised, and followed set patterns. The first battle of a *pandilla* war involved fighting with sticks, stones, and bare hands, but each new battle involved an escalation of weaponry, first to knives and broken bottles, then mortars, and eventually to guns, AK-47s, and fragmentation grenades. Although the rate of escalation could vary, its sequence never did and *pandillas* did not begin their wars immediately with firearms. This ritualised escalation arguably constituted both a restraining mechanism – escalation is a positive constitutive process in which each stage calls for a greater but definite intensity of action and is therefore always under the actors’ control – and an “early warning system” for local neighbourhood inhabitants. Although gang wars often had negative consequences for the local community – people were sometimes caught in the cross-fire of gang wars, and infrastructural damage was common – these were arguably indirect insofar as gangs never directly victimised the local population of their own neighbourhood. The threat to local neighbourhood populations stemmed from other gangs, whom the local gang would engage within a prescribed manner, thereby limiting “the all-pervading unpredictability of

⁴ Parallels can be made with the “love for the people” that Ernesto “Che” Guevara (1969: 398) saw as being the mark of “the true revolutionary”. This is perhaps particularly appropriate considering the strong associations that exist between *Sandinismo* and the “Cult of Che” (see Lancaster, 1988: 132 & 185).

violence”,⁵ and locally creating a predictable and relative “safe haven” in its own neighbourhood.

In a context of chronic insecurity, this function was arguably socially positive, and certainly local neighbourhood inhabitants very much recognised it as such, never calling the police during gang wars, nor ever denouncing gang members.⁶ Although there was some ambivalence towards the gang phenomenon – the parents of gang members frequently worried about their offspring, and would often publicly berate their *pandillero* sons – there was no fear of the local gang in the neighbourhood, and it was generally viewed positively. As *Don Sergio* put it during an interview in 1997:

“The *pandilla* looks after the neighbourhood and screws others; it protects us and allows us to feel a little bit safer, to live our lives a little bit more easily... Gangs are not a good thing, and it’s their fault that we have to live with all this insecurity, but that’s a problem of *pandillerismo* in general, not of our gang here in the *barrio*. They protect us, help us – without them, things would be much worse for us.”

This view of the gang stemmed not only from the fact that the *pandilla* was the purveyor of security but also because it was the only social form in the neighbourhood that displayed any sort of “community spirit”. Indeed, the gang’s violent “care” for the *barrio* stood in sharp contrast to the wider atomisation and social breakdown, and arguably provided the only concrete institutional medium through which an otherwise absent form of “*communitas*”⁷ was enacted in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández. Neighbourhood inhabitants who otherwise shunned each other – to avoid entangling themselves into webs of reciprocal obligations – would avidly seek each other out to swap stories about the gang, exchanging eye-witness accounts, spreading rumours, and re-telling incidents, thereby converting the *pandilla* into the primary symbolic index of community, in a manner that bears comparison with Bloch’s classic description of the development of a “communal aesthetic pleasure” among the Merina and Zafimaniry of Madagascar as a result of local youth violence.⁸

It became rapidly apparent on my return to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 2002 that the gang had changed radically compared to 1996-97, however. It was now made up of just 18 youths aged 17 to 23 years old. Although all had belonged to the gang in 1996-97, the gang’s practices and attitudes had evolved. Gang warfare had disappeared, levels of intra-neighbourhood gang-related violence had increased, and the gang was now

⁵ See Arendt (1969: 5).

⁶ At the same time, the Police were not a visible presence in the neighbourhood in 1996-97, partly because gangs out-gunned them, which obviously made patrolling and control difficult (see Nicaragua Network News, 2001).

⁷ See Turner (1969).

⁸ Bloch (1996: 216).

intimately connected to a thriving local crack cocaine-based drug economy.⁹ The *pandilleros* were now a threatening presence, no longer imbued with an ethos of “loving” the *barrio*, as a *pandillero* called Roger made clear:

“We couldn’t give a fuck about the barrio inhabitants anymore... If they get attacked, if they’re robbed, if they have problems, who cares? We don’t lift a finger to help them anymore, we just laugh instead, hell, we even applaud those who are robbing them... Why should we do anything for them? Now we just hang out in the streets, smoke crack, and rob, and nothing else!”

This was very visibly partly related to crack consumption. Although drug consumption had been widespread within the gang in 1996-97, the main drug consumed at the time had been marijuana, which has very different neurological and psychiatric effects to crack. Crack makes users extremely violent, as a gang member called Chucki emphasised:

“This drug, crack, it makes you really violent, I tell you... when I smoke up and somebody insults me, I immediately want to kill them, to get a machete and do them in, to defend myself... I don’t stop and think, talk to them, ask them why or whatever... I don’t even recognise them, all I want to do is kill them... it’s the drug, I tell you, that’s where the violence comes from...”

There were very obviously many more acts of spontaneous, unpredictable public violence occurring in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in 2002 compared to 1996-97, and the majority could be linked to crack consumption. Furthermore, most incidents seemed to involve gang members. Although they were by no means the only crack users in the neighbourhood, the gang clearly constituted a privileged site of crack consumption, and all the *pandilleros* were crack addicts. Consequently, it was extremely common to see drugged *pandilleros* stopping local inhabitants in the streets and asking for money for another fix. If ignored or refused, they would almost invariably lash out.

At the same time, although crack consumption was an important factor behind this changed behaviour pattern and consequent rise in insecurity, to a larger extent this was arguably the result of the gang’s intimate association with drug trafficking. Cocaine began to be traded in the *barrio* around mid-1999, initially on a small-scale by just one individual but rapidly expanding into a three-tiered pyramidal drug economy by mid-2000. At the top of the pyramid was the “*narco*” who brought cocaine into the neighbourhood. The *narco* wholesaled his goods to, among others, half a dozen “*púsheres*” (sic) in the neighbourhood. *Púsheres* re-sold this cocaine in smaller quantities or converted it into crack which they sold from their houses, mainly to a regular clientele which

⁹ Although cocaine and crack were available in Managua in the mid-1990s, they were not widespread and only became prevalent from 1999 onwards. For a detailed explanation of the growth of the cocaine trade in Nicaragua see Rodgers (2004).

included the “*muleros*”, who were the bottom rung of the drug dealing pyramid, selling sold small doses of crack to all-comers on *barrio* street corners. There were 19 *muleros* in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, 16 of whom were *pandilleros*.¹⁰ The rewards of such small-scale dealing were substantial: an individual *mulero* could make US\$350-600 per month, equivalent to three to five times the average Nicaraguan wage. At the same time, although gang member *muleros* conducted their drug dealing transactions individually, the gang as a group acted to ensure the proper functioning and protection of the *barrio* drug economy in general, providing security services to the *narco* and to *púsheres*, and making certain that transactions proceeded smoothly. *Pandilleros* would enforce contracts, roughing up recalcitrant clients if the *narco* or *púsheres* asked them to, as well as guarding drug shipments as they moved both within and outside the *barrio*.

The gang would also make sure that clients could enter the neighbourhood unmolested by either the local population or outsiders, and the ritualised wars of the past with other gangs had completely disappeared as a result, presumably because they would have made it difficult for potential clients to come safely into the *barrio*, and were therefore detrimental to the gang’s changed drug dealing preoccupations. Violent confrontations with other gangs did still occur, but in a different way. For example, in early 2001 a group of *muleros* from the nearby *barrio* Nosara gang occupied one of the entrances to *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández in order to intercept crack clients. When they realised what had happened, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* attacked them with guns and shot two dead and left three critically injured. The gang had furthermore also instituted a veritable regime of terror at the level of the neighbourhood. *Pandilleros* would strut about the streets, menacingly displaying guns and machetes, and verbal warn *barrio* inhabitants of potential retribution should they denounce them or others involved in the local drugs trade.¹¹ They would moreover frequently back these threats with acts of arbitrary violence as *Doña* Yolanda described:

¹⁰ All of the various actors of the drugs trade were in fact linked to the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* in one way or another. The *narco* was an ex-gang member from the early 1990s and all the *púsheres* were either ex-*pandilleros* from the mid-1990s or else closely related to ex-*pandilleros*, and the three non-*pandillero muleros* were former gang members.

¹¹ Although there were more police patrols in the neighbourhood than five years previously, these were clearly token in nature, and tended simply to drive down one street of the *barrio*, turn around, and drive back up a parallel street – generally past the *muleros* on their street corners. There were sporadic police raids on *barrio púsheres* – although never on the *narco* – but these tended to turn up little of suspicion, as the *púsher* would have generally received a tip-off from a corrupt policeman (as one told me after being raided). When the police did, occasionally, find evidence, it only affected reputedly ambitious *púsheres* who were potential rivals to the *narco*, which supported the consensus in the *barrio* that the police had been “bought” by the *narco* and that he used them to get rid of his enemies. It seems likely that the *narco* may have been reluctant to use the *pandilleros* for this purpose due to their close links with the *púsheres*, who were all ex-*pandilleros*.

“Five years ago, you could trust the *pandilleros*, but not anymore... They’ve become corrupted due to this drug crack... They threaten and attack people from the *barrio* now, rob them of whatever they have, whoever they are... They never did that before... They used to protect us, look out for us, but now they don’t care, they only look out for themselves, for their illegal business (*bisnes*)... People are scared, you’ve got to be careful what you say or what you do, because otherwise they’ll attack you... Even if you say nothing, they might still come and rob you, come into your home, steal a chair, food, some clothes, whatever they can find... They often do, you know it’s them, but you can’t blame them, otherwise they’ll come and burn your house down... It’s their way of telling you to be careful... If you say anything to them, if you do anything, if you denounce them, then they’ll come at night and wreak their vengeance... We live in terror here in the *barrio*, you have to be scared or else you’re sure to be sorry... It’s not like it used to be when you were here last time, Dennis, when the *pandilleros* were kids we could be proud of because of what they did for us and for the *barrio*... They’re like strangers to us now, they just do things for themselves and never for the good of the community like before...”

Mutatis mutandis: Gangs, violence, and vigilantism

I have argued elsewhere that *pandillas* and their violence can clearly be seen as primary forms of social structuration in contemporary urban Nicaragua, rather than the unmitigated source of chaos and disorder that they are generally perceived to be.¹² In particular, I contend that they can be conceived as examples of “social sovereignty” that organically establish localised but variable regimes of political order within the wider conditions of social and state breakdown, constrained economic circumstances, insecurity and uncertainty that characterise post-revolutionary Nicaraguan society. This is something that came out particularly strongly in interviews I conducted with ex-*pandilleros*. Although gangs in Nicaragua can be traced back to the 1940s, by all accounts they were small-scale and relatively innocuous youth aggregations until the early 1990s, when their numbers increased massively and they became significantly violent. This development was clearly linked to the end of the civil war which affected Nicaragua for much of the 1980s, as many of the new gang members were 16 to 20 year old youths, freshly demobilised from the *Sandinista* Popular Army or the *Contra* forces. Gang members from this period whom I interviewed all mentioned that becoming *pandilleros* had seemed a natural continuation of their previous roles as conscripts or guerrillas, that is to say as “defenders of the Nation” or as “freedom fighters”. The early 1990s were highly uncertain times in Nicaragua, as “social conflicts ...reached a new level of barely restrained anarchy”,¹³ partly due to a widespread process of “state disintegration”.¹⁴ Ex-*pandilleros* recalled feeling a sense of responsibility for their friends, families, and local

¹² See Rodgers (2006).

¹³ Lancaster (1992: 293).

¹⁴ See Isbester (1996).

communities in the face of this insecurity, and joining or constituting a gang had been a means of “serving” and “protecting” these more effectively than doing so individually.

To this extent, a parallel can clearly be made with notions of vigilantism, which Abrahams has classically described as including a range of violent social practices that emerge from the efforts of communities “to make sense of their lives and maintain some sort of order in their world”, particularly “in ‘frontier’ zones where the state is viewed as ineffective or corrupt”.¹⁵ Indeed, the association between youth gangsterism and vigilantism is not new. Suttles, for example, famously analysed gangs in inner city Chicago neighbourhoods as “vigilante peer groups” policing and defending “warrior societies” in the face of “the failure of ...public institutions”.¹⁶ Although Abrahams cautions against assimilating “autonomous ‘informal sector’ groupings” such as gangs with vigilantism, on the grounds that the former tend to break “first- rather than second-order legal rules”,¹⁷ this is in many ways a moot point in contexts where legal rules to all intents and purposes hardly apply. Indeed, this is something that Abrahams implicitly recognises when he discusses the way vigilantism “occupies an awkward borderland between law and illegality”,¹⁸ insofar as it is formally illegal but informally accepted. As a result, vigilante practices are frequently legitimised through “commonsense” notions of “decent, independent, law-abiding citizens, anxious to live and work in peace, and ready to defend their right to do so if the state fails them”,¹⁹ despite the fact that they do not actually have any formal right to do so.²⁰

Ultimately, both gangs and vigilantism can be characterised as highly ambivalent social phenomena. At the same time, however, this ambivalence arguably derives less from the fact that they emerge in a legal twilight zone, but more because of the fact that they are “rather labile ...manifestations [that] are relatively short-lived, and ...always capable of slipping and sliding in one direction or another”.²¹ This “lability” means that social practices such as vigilantism or Nicaraguan *pandillerismo* that might at first glance seem in some way normatively positive – insofar as they create order in contexts of chaos – have the potential to rapidly become socially negative. This is something that is

¹⁵ Abrahams (1998: 3 & 9).

¹⁶ Suttles (1972: 191).

¹⁷ Abrahams (1998: 163).

¹⁸ Abrahams (1998: 7).

¹⁹ Abrahams (1998: 3).

²⁰ The discourse that emerged in the mid-1990s justifying the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang’s violent activities as “acts of love” for the neighbourhood arguably similarly provided the institution of *pandillerismo* with a localised legitimacy, as was evidenced by *Don Sergio*’s 1997 testimony, as well as *Doña Yolanda*’s remark five years later that “the *pandilleros* were kids we could be proud of because of what they did for us and for the *barrio*”.

²¹ Abrahams (1998: 7).

particularly well illustrated by the evolutionary trajectory of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* between 1997 and 2002, whereby it mutated from being a vigilante-style social form that promoted a solidaristic sense of local community in the face of wider processes of social breakdown – something that could plausibly be spun as normatively positive – to a more exclusive and predatory institution focused on promoting a limited form of capital accumulation based on the exploitative control of a particular resource – something more difficult to support and justify in social terms.

At the same time, though, while thinking about the transformation of *pandillerismo* in terms of changes in the institution's normative form and function makes a good deal of sense, it arguably tells us little about the specific processes through which change occurs. As Cohen has pointed out, this is important insofar as it is necessary to go beyond simply describing either the function or the form of an institution in order to properly understand it, particularly when considering this institution over time.²² Although there is obviously a relationship between form and function, neither form nor function are inherent to any given institution, and neither continuity nor change in either necessarily entails continuity or change in the other, since different forms can achieve a specific function, while conversely, a particular form can fulfil different functions. From this perspective, in order to really understand the implications of the “lability” of Nicaraguan vigilante gangs, it is important not only to have a picture of what is common and what is different between the two manifestations of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* described above, but also to have a sense of the actual process of transformation it underwent, as it is this that will provide us with a real understanding of how and why Nicaraguan *pandillerismo* changed.

Tracing the transformation of the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla*

It would be tempting to link the differences between the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* in 1997 and 2002 to crack cocaine. Certainly, this is what Ronnie intimated during our conversation on the first day of my return to the neighbourhood. When pressed as to why the gang had “turned bad” he suggested:

“Because of all sorts of shit, *maje*, because of all sorts of shit... But most of all because of *la droga* (drugs)...”

“Drugs? What do you mean, marijuana?”

²² Cohen (1969: 219).

“No, of course not, *maje*, that stuff’s *nitua* (cool), you know what it’s like, there’s nothing harmful about marijuana. No, *maje*, what I’m talking about is *la piedra* (the stone), crack cocaine. Marijuana is nothing compared to that shit, I tell you. Crack’s changed everything...”

At the same time, the emergence of drugs only goes so far in explaining why *pandillerismo* in Nicaragua underwent such a wholesale transformation, particularly when one considers that all the testimonies I gathered in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández tended to suggest that the gang was already in the process of changing when cocaine made its appearance in the neighbourhood in 1999.

Indeed, the gang’s mutation seems to have begun as early as the end of 1997. The *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* had until then been divided into distinct age and geographical subgroups: there were three age cohorts – the 7 to 12 years olds, the 13 to 17 years olds, and those 18 years old and over – and three geographical subgroups, respectively associated with the central area of the neighbourhood, the “*abajo*” (or West) side of the neighbourhood, and the “*arriba*” (or East) side of the neighbourhood. The different geographical subgroups had distinct names, respectively “*los de la Calle Ocho*” (named after the alleyway where this group tended to congregate), “*los Cancheros*” (because of a “*cancha*”, or playing field – if only in name, because all it was in fact was a stretch of relatively un-potholed road – on that side of the *barrio*) and “*los Dragones*” (because all its members had a dragon tattoo). These different subgroups generally operated separately, except in the context of gang warfare, when they would come together in order to defend the neighbourhood or attack another. At the same time, even if the different groups were very autonomous, the individual gang members always presented themselves as members of a generic *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla*, and none of the subgroups, whether determined by age or geography, ever fought each other, although fights did occasionally break out between individuals.

Around November 1997, the *Calle Ocho pandilla* subgroup fell apart because its entire elder age cohort “matured out” of the gang simultaneously. This seems to have been precipitated by the departure from the neighbourhood of a prominent member of that age cohort a few months previously and the sudden death of another. The younger members of the subgroup were absorbed into the two other *barrio pandilla* subgroups and the *Calle Ocho* subgroup ceased to exist. This polarisation of the gang into two subgroups had important consequences for the gang’s internal dynamics. The tripartite structure of the gang had constituted a stable system, with each subgroup effectively holding the others in a balance of power. Binary structures, however, are inherently oppositional, and by all accounts there rapidly developed a strong sense of rivalry between the two

remaining subgroups. This was reflected in the development of a heightened sense of subgroup territoriality that culminated in areas of the *barrio* dominated by one group becoming no-go areas for the other and vice-versa, something that was unprecedented compared to past internal *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang dynamics.

Tension was further heightened towards the end of 1998 when the *Cancheros* subgroup changed its name to “*Los Killers*”, because members of the subgroup were involved in a series of murders. Around Easter 1999, this tension erupted into a full-fledged conflict between the *Killers* and the *Dragones* subgroups. Ronnie, who had then been a member of the *Dragones*, explained the situation in the following way:

“The conflict was inevitable. They [the *Killers*] believed they were the masters, you understand. They believed they were better than us. But here, in the *pandilla*, everybody’s equal, you can’t have a situation where some are better than others, we’re all equal, you understand, nobody is better than anybody else. In the *pandillero* language, we say that they were shitting bigger than their arses (*‘se la tiraban aquí del culo’*), that they were getting too big for their boots. They were trying to put one up on us, which wasn’t right, you understand, and so we had to make them respect us, to make them understand ... We had to make them respect what we call the law of ice (*‘la ley del hielo’*). What this means is that when somebody tries to put one up on you, if they try to dominate you, then you have to give it to them, you’ve got to hit them, slash them, beat them up real good, you know, smash their head against the wall until they’re covered in blood, defeated, dead, perhaps, at any rate so that they’ll never defy you again. That’s what you have to do to make them respect the law of ice, as we say here in Nicaragua, so that’s why the conflict between us was inevitable.”

The inevitable conflict was sparked off when a family with four youths belonging to the *Killers* moved from the West side of the *barrio*, which was the *Killers’* side, to the East side, the *Dragones’* side. The *Dragones* wanted nothing to do with the four *Killers* *pandilleros*, but at the same time gave them an ultimatum to either leave the *Killers* or leave their side of the *barrio*. Refusing the *Dragones’* demands, the *Killers* decided to take pre-emptive action and attack the *Dragones* by surprise one evening. This was unprecedented behaviour insofar as it was the first time a *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* subgroup attacked another. The *Dragones* had – fortuitously for them – been planning a surprise attack on a neighbouring *pandilla* later that night and so had their weapons at hand, and the fight quickly escalated into a raging gun battle that had little in the way of the customary ritualised nature of gang warfare. The gang subgroups fought each other for several hours, causing widespread damage to *barrio* houses and almost one hundred neighbourhood inhabitants were injured, although somewhat miraculously there were no deaths. The *Dragones* eventually acquired the upper hand and went on a rampage, hunting down and beating up *Killers* gang members – in one gruesome case cutting the ear off one (while the *pandillero’s* father lost an eye trying to intervene) – and systematically attacking

the houses on the *Killers'* side of the *barrio*, including burning several down with Molotov cocktails.

According to both *pandilleros* and non-*pandilleros*, this conflagration was “too much” for the *barrio* population. Several families called the Police and denounced the *pandilleros*. Six *Dragones* members were arrested with the active cooperation of neighbourhood inhabitants, while another half dozen fled the *barrio*. When the case against the six who had been caught was due to come to court, however, those *Dragones* gang members that remained in the neighbourhood threatened the *barrio* inhabitants who were pressing charges with reprisals, and the case was quickly dropped. This unprecedented episode profoundly marked the *barrio pandilleros* and fundamentally changed their attitude towards the neighbourhood population. As a *Dragones pandillero* called Roger put it:

“The people in the *barrio* showed themselves to be hypocrites then, all of a sudden they hated us, and they turned against us, but before that we had been respected, liked, because we helped and protected them... without us they couldn't survive! Now they don't want to know about anything, they'll fucking denounce us if they get half a chance! Why should we do anything for such treacherous people (*gente trucha*)?”

The *Dragones* began to wander about the *barrio* visibly armed partly in order to intimidate the *barrio* population, but also the *Killers*, who spontaneously disaggregated in the face of this terrorisation. At the same time, however, the *Dragones* rapidly reduced in size from some forty members just after the conflict with the *Killers* to twenty members by the beginning of 2001.²³ To a certain extent, demographic factors came into play, as the peak of *pandillero* recruitment in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández seems to have been reached in 1995-96, and many of those who joined the *pandilla* then had been 14-15 years old, and were consequently reaching an age at which “maturing out” naturally came into play. Another factor was that in early 2000 the municipal authorities built two basketball courts in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández, which – more incidentally than by design – provided an alternative focal point to the *pandilla* for neighbourhood youth, and in particular for those wavering over membership.²⁴ More generally, though, the conflict with the *Killers* and its aftermath also profoundly affected *Dragones pandilleros*, as one called Elvis, who had had to flee the *barrio* in order to avoid being caught by the police after the *Dragones-Killers* conflict, makes clear:

²³ Two of the twenty subsequently died due to drug consumption-related health complications. The eighteen remaining were the eighteen that made up the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilla* in 2002.

²⁴ This should in no way be seen as signalling an increased state presence in the *barrio*, as the basketball courts were the first public works to be carried out since the *Sandinista* regime's urban reconstruction efforts in the early 1980s, and were linked to the Liberal Party's (failed) municipal re-election campaign.

“It was horrible, I was running from here to there, millions of places, from one to the other to avoid being caught, and it’s horrible, I tell you... You feel like you’re being tracked, hunted, like an animal, always looking over your shoulder... I never want to be on the run again, so ever since all that, I’ve looked to distance myself, to avoid problems, especially as those guys in the *pandilla* have got crazier and crazier, you know, more violent and all... I began spending less time with the *pandilla*, doing my own thing, not looking for trouble. I still talk with everybody and all, but when there’s going to be trouble, I do my own thing, you know, to avoid problems...”

It was at this point that the emergence of crack cocaine had a significant impact on the gang in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández. Crack consumption by gang members began before those who remained became centrally involved in drug dealing from early 2000 onwards, but both accelerated the transformation of the gang in a variety of ways. Both crack consumption and dealing led to a reduction in the number of youths involved by creating impediments for younger gang members – in particular those under 13 years old – insofar as they are both activities that are physiologically less suited for the young. The health effects of smoking crack are particularly deleterious on children, and dealing can be a problematic activity for them due to clients’ lack of confidence, as well as their inability effectively to protect themselves from potentially violent addict clients. Some gang members also simply did not take to crack cocaine, as an ex-*Dragones pandillero* called Kalia told me:

“I left the gang when everybody started smoking crack, because it really fucks you up. Everybody started doing it as soon as the *narco* started selling it, and then it got heavier and heavier as the *pandilla* got involved in the drug dealing, so there was no way of staying in the gang and not doing that shit.”

The gang’s involvement in the emergent drugs trade also completely changed other patterns of behaviour, for example leading to the rapid abandonment of ritualised gang warfare with neighbouring *pandillas*, as this was an activity that could potentially scare crack clients away. The gang’s ever-more parochial interests also crystallised gang members’ already negative attitudes towards the local neighbourhood population, and this ever-increasing antagonism vis-à-vis the *barrio* also contributed to gang members dropping out, as Ronnie told me:

“I became independent [sic] because I didn’t like the gang’s hatred towards the *barrio*... You know how we used to love this neighbourhood, Dennis, you remember, no? That’s why I was in the *pandilla*, because I loved the *barrio* – we’d protect it, take care of it, people would appreciate it... When everything fell apart and people in the *barrio* and also the guys in the gang began to act like shits towards each other, I just said fuck it, that’s not my thing, and left.”

The gang members that remained established themselves as *muleros* in the local drugs economy. This was of course hardly fortuitous. A drug economy cannot rely on classic mechanisms of regulation and contract-enforcement – such as the law – in a

context where drugs are illicit, and inevitably needs alternative mechanisms to impose regularity onto transactions. As numerous theorists have pointed out, the most basic means of social regulation is violence, and as the dominant manifestation of brutality in the neighbourhood, the gang was ideally positioned to supply this violence.²⁵ At the same time, the exclusive nature of the drugs trade meant that to be able to provide this violence coherently the gang needed to be a small, self-interested unit rather than a large, communitarian group. Indeed, the solidaristic nature of *pandillerismo* in the mid-1990s might very well have precluded the *pandilla* from becoming involved in the drugs trade had cocaine appeared then, because gang members would most likely have been unwilling to direct their violence against neighbourhood inhabitants. When the drugs trade emerged and consolidated during 1999-2000, however, the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández gang was undergoing a number of endogenous changes that were leading to an organisational shakedown of the gang and an inversion of its previously solidarity with the local community that meant that it was more amenable to offering the services required by the drugs trade, and also to grasping the opportunities provided by the appearance of cocaine at that particular point in time.

Conclusion: Understanding social change

As Bardhan has remarked, “an institution’s mere function of serving the interests of potential beneficiaries is clearly inadequate in *explaining* it, just as it is an incompetent detective who tries to explain a murder mystery only by looking for the beneficiary and, on that basis alone, proceeds to arrest the heir of the murdered rich man”.²⁶ There always exists at any given time a “repertory” of possible collective actions at the disposal of social actors, and the ones they chose and how these evolve are the result of a conjunction of factors that cannot necessarily be predicted in a deterministic manner.²⁷ Rather, as Douglas has pointed out, institutional arrangements tend to emerge through a process of “bricolage”,²⁸ the result of *ad hoc* combinations of pre-existing social forms and processes. It is therefore not the relationship between a given institutional form and function *per se* that is important, but rather understanding what it is that enables a given institution to articulate a given function, what the limitations are on this particular

²⁵ Furthermore, as an ex-gang member, the *narvo* was ideally connected to the gang in order to involve them.

²⁶ Bardhan (1989: 1392, italics in original).

²⁷ See de Certeau (1984).

²⁸ Douglas (1987: 66).

institution performing this particular function, and what the different factors are that can lead to a change either in form or function or both.

The emergence of the drugs trade in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández during mid-1999 clearly stands out as an important factor in explaining the profound transformation that the neighbourhood *pandilla* underwent between 1996-97 and 2002. At the same time, however, endogenous changes affecting the *pandilla* before the rise of drug dealing were clearly also just as critical, not only in terms of understanding the specific trajectory of the gang, but also for comprehending the actual development of the drugs trade in the neighbourhood. Without the gang's changing internal dynamics it is likely that the drugs trade would not have been able to take root in *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández when it did. At the same time, there also existed something of a positive feedback loop between the two social processes that mutually transformed and consolidated their evolution, to the extent that we can talk of a real "compatibility" between *pandillerismo* and the drugs trade. Without this "compatibility", both the drugs trade and the gang's transformation from a communitarian social form to a more predatory institution would have been impossible, as it was in many ways this more than anything else that enabled them to flourish and mutually reinforce each other.

Seen in this way, it can be argued that it is not so much particular endogenous or exogenous factors such as the internal dynamics of gangs or the drugs trade that are important in order to explain the "lability" of Nicaraguan *pandillerismo*, but rather the fact that these issues came together in a particular manner at a particular moment in time. To this extent, it is perhaps more accurate to talk about the existence of a "contingent compatibility", insofar as the transformational trajectory of any given institution through time is to a large extent not so much determined as contingent, an improvisation from a range of possibilities. What is important to understand, then, is what determines the array of options and their potential articulation at any given point in time, and while the emergence of exogenous factors or the endogenous contradictions of institutions are important to explaining social change, they do not constitute by themselves the basis upon which to explain the "lability" of given institutions. Rather, we need to have a more holistic idea of the complex interplay between exogenous stimuli, endogenous contradictions, and the particular nature of an institution, its context, and the agency of the social actors involved, as is starkly highlighted by the way the vigilante gang of *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández "turned bad" between 1997 and 2002.

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